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ABSTRACT

Courses for new instructors of composition--teaching assistants--can be conceptualized to view learning and teaching as a continuing and reciprocal process. Various psychologists, including Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, show phases in the development of conceptual learning. This theoretical base may be used as a starting point for a course for teaching assistants. To take a developmental stance in a classroom, the teacher needs to be aware that, while students may have reached a stage where they have the ability to carry out conceptual thinking, they may not always do it very well. To evaluate students in a writing class, teachers must be aware of the difference ecological psychologists make between the term molecular activity and molecular activity itself. This awareness can assist the growth of the teaching assistant/student as well. The training classroom has a resonance of its own. Graduate students are hired to teach composition because they themselves are writers. Practice leads to the construction of theory, which in turn leads to new practice. Departments that educate writing teachers ought to do so from the perspective that links three theories: a theory of knowledge, a theory of instruction, and a theory of development. (DF)

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Teaching Assistants as Teachers and Writers:

Developmental Issues in TA Training

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Teaching Assistants as Teachers and Writers: Developmental Issues in TA Training

Last June when I submitted my abstract for this presentation, I had just finished a report for the writing program at the University of Southern California on its Professional Development Seminar. Like most courses of this type, it gives new instructors background in rhetorical theory, helps them in the practical aspects of teaching an essentially content-less course, and generally shows that composition is a serious field for study. The seminar should do all of these things. But through my interviews with some of the participants in the course, I began to see that a training course needs to set its information about theory and practice in a developmental framework. For what goes on in the seminar affects not just the development of the writing students the TAs are instructing, but also the development of the TAs who are themselves growing as teachers and writers.

What I want to talk about this afternoon then is how courses for new instructors can be conceptualized to view learning and teaching as continuing and reciprocal processes. In other words, my perspective is ecological in the sense that the psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner uses the term: there is a process of "mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the

settings are embedded".[1] This view takes into account that the developing person--child or adult--is a growing, dynamic entity who restructures his environment, that the interaction between the person and his environment is reciprocal, and that environment isn't limited to one setting, but includes many interconnecting settings which influence and are influenced by the developing person.

Compositionists generally think of development in terms of students' ability to think more abstractly and therefore to move beyond simple narration to argument and persuasion. While the translation of developmental studies to discourse forms is useful, I intend to ignore that and look at social and cognitive theories more generally.

Piaget's scheme of intellectual development, for example, shows the child moving from a sensorimotor stage in which she acts on the world physically to understand it, to a concrete operational stage where she can use symbols to represent objects and events in an increasingly organized way. Finally, about the age of 15, the child develops the ability to perform abstract thought operations: she can reason logically, hypothesize, and draw conclusions from premises.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky also posits three phases in the development of conceptual learning. At first, the child sorts things into groups, or "heaps" as Vygotsky calls them, but without any real sense of why the things go together. Next the child begins to think in "complexes"; he finds actual bonds and relationships among the objects to group them together. Finally he is able to form genuine concepts--to analyze, to

synthesize, to abstract.

Jerome Bruner has identified three forms of representation for knowledge and information: the enactive in which the person learns through doing, the iconic in which he organizes knowledge through perception, and the symbolic in which he represents knowledge through words or language. Bruner's scheme is less tied to the developing child and can be generally construed as tentative processes in which any sort of knowledge is acquired. However, Piaget's scheme and Vygotsky's can be similarly construed.

These theorists do not say, however, that development progresses smoothly and incrementally. Intuitively, of course, we know that it doesn't. For one thing, growth can move in spurts as well as in linear curves. There are also transitions between periods of growth which are never smooth. In fact, we often experience periods of regression when we learn new skills. Our abilities and previous skills seem to go to pieces for awhile. Vygotsky describes the phenomenon in this way: "It should be noted," he says, "that even the normal adult, capable of forming and using concepts, does not consistently operate with concepts in his thinking. ... [T]he adult constantly shifts from conceptual to concrete, complex-like thinking."[2] Piaget says that development is recapitulated through the processes of centration and decentration at each stage: one moves from a centered position to one that is more objective and differentiated. Bruner, too, points out that much "spontaneous learning . . . consists of a kind of translation of one representational system into another".[3]

The theoretical view of growth I have presented thus far seems to indicate that a person grows or doesn't grow pretty much on her own. Again, on an intuitive level we know that isn't true, nor is it true theoretically. In his essay "Patterns of Growth," Bruner says that growth depends on a "contingent tutor-learner interaction"; without that, there is no growth.[4] Vygotsky posits a "zone of proximal development" which he defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers."[5] In other words, we grow through helpful mediation and intervention. Development is social and interactive. It doesn't take place in a vacuum.

I now want to use this theoretical base as a starting point for a course for teaching assistants. It is important that the new instructors know about these general theories of human development to apply them in the context of their writing courses. These should have "developmental resonance," a term I borrow from Colarusso and Nemiroff, psychologists who study adult development. This resonance is the "capacity to share, respect, understand, and value the thoughts and feelings of [students] because of explicit awareness on the part of the [teacher] that he either has experienced or likely will experience what his [student] is feeling or living."[6] TAs are hired to teach writing after all, not because of their abilities in literature or any other field of codified knowledge, but because they are writers. As writers, they have experienced the difficulties of the writing

process and how they themselves have met or failed to meet the demands writing makes of them.

To take a developmental stance in a classroom, the teacher needs to be aware that, while students may have reached a stage where they have the ability to carry out formal, conceptual thinking, they may not always do that very well. A student may be able to form concepts but have difficulty defining them. Or she may have difficulty applying a concept she formulates to new situations. Vygotsky has indicated that these are real problems for adolescents, even those we teach who are in late adolescence. Often this is reflected in the student's writing which, as Gene Krupa points out, lacks a "reflective consciousness" behind it and instead expresses the "retailed experience of others."[7] While we may expect them to be able to argue topics convincingly, our students may well be unable to see all sides of an issue simply because they can't always think flexibly.

Teachers should be aware of the study done by William Perry on the ethical and intellectual growth of college students, and its ramifications for both students and teachers. For one thing, Perry points out that in college, students continue to grow, that their growth moves from a polar, right-wrong view of the world to a more relativistic one. This growth requires great courage because the student moves toward independent thinking and commitment. Educators have the duty, Perry says, "of confirming the student in his community with them--a membership he achieves ... through his own making of meaning, his daring to take risks, and his courage in committing himself."[8] Learning then must become

collaborative; the instructor should realize that her students have as much to teach her as she has to teach them. And she must let them know that they can safely take risks when they write.

To evaluate his students in the writing class, a teacher must be aware of the difference between what ecological psychology terms molecular activity and molar activity. This is comparable to the difference between a single composing process that produces a single composition and what Louise Phelps terms a whole composing life.[9] Growth becomes obvious through examining the composing life the student has over the semester or quarter, not by looking at single essays. Donald Graves notes the importance of viewing development over a long period of time with young children.[10] In that way, one sees their writing from a perspective that shows forward moves, regressions, and holding patterns. This perspective is as necessary for the teacher of 18 year old writers as it is for the teacher of 8 year old writers.

What I have been implying all along is that the writing classroom has a social context, which refers not so much to a setting as to a network of relationships, both personal and cultural. The core of the context is made up of the dyadic relationships between the teacher and each of his students. But there are obviously more than just dyads in the class; students form other, more complex relationships among themselves, and several students may be part of a particular relationship with an instructor. I am thinking here of tutorial groups that meet with and without the instructor to discuss and work on writing. In all these relationships, the teacher needs to be the mediator for student growth. In other words, he intervenes at the zone of

proximal development in the writer's process when necessary, in order to foster the dynamic processes that occur during writing. He should also allow "more capable peers" to intervene.

I have indicated thus far what the student/teacher can learn from the training seminar so that as teacher he or she can help students in their growth as writers. Now I want to reverse this perspective to examine how the seminar can assist the growth of the teacher/student.

First of all, the training classroom, like the composition classroom, has a developmental resonance of its own. There are networks of relationships between the director and the TAs, and among the TAs themselves. The director's role can best be described as that of mentor, a model teacher whom the TAs can identify with. The mentor has the expertise to know that new TAs are not much different in their view of teaching from the students Perry describes; they often think in polar, right-wrong ways about teaching. Charles Schuster, for example, notes that new teachers of writing "want <u>the</u> answer, <u>the</u> failsafe method that will spell them from the dark tower of uncertainty and failure."[10] Of course, <u>the</u> answer and <u>the</u> method do not exist, and TAs need to be helped to take informed risks in their classes.

The seminar instructor should also recognize that teaching skills and abilities not only progress but regress, that teachers, like writing students, have zones of proximal development. He or she can work with the new instructors to fine tune their teaching abilities and to make them aware that as teachers their growth will not be smooth. I am not forgetting that experienced teaching assistants from a writing program may also fur-

fill this role for the new instructors. These mentor/mentee relationships can continue for as long as they are useful, and this year's new TA may well become next year's mentor.

As I noted earlier, graduate students are hired to teach composition because they themselves are writers. Let me explore this notion as it relates to the continuing growth of teachers. Through a teaching journal, in which they are asked to record and comment on their experiences in the classroom, TAs can begin to abstract theory from very practical situations. You'll recall that both Vygotsky and Bruner suggest that this is how we continue to learn in new situations. Practice leads to the construction of theory which in turn leads to new practice. The seminar is the place to introduce this concept of a continuing, lifelong spiral of practice into theory.

As writers, teachers have what Robert Parker calls "tacit theories of discourse," which they have developed in the course of their own experience with writing.[11] The problem is to make these focal and self-critical, to make the teachers aware of their own implicit theories of writing. Teaching journals and other writing which focus upon the teacher's composing life help the teaching writer reflect on the theory he has developed. The rhetorical theory presented in the seminar can also be illuminated through concrete experience recorded in the journals. Discussion of this writing in small groups develops a sense of a teaching and writing community within the seminar, a community whose life extends beyond the confines and time limits of a training course.

What I have discussed here so briefly today is only sugges-

tive of the possibilities for helping new teaching assistants to develop. We must now begin to act on our intuitions about growth and apply theoretical concepts in our professional courses. At a time when the quality of undergraduate teaching and education is being called into question,[12] departments that educate writing teachers ought to do so from the perspective which, Bruner suggests, links three theories: a theory of knowledge, a theory of instruction, and a theory of development.

Notes

[1]Urie Bronfenbrenner, The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979) 21.

[2]Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language, trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gerturde Vakar (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962) 75.

[3]Jerome Bruner, Beyond the Information Given, ed. Jeremy M. Anglin (New York: Norton, 1973) 316.

[4]Bruner, Toward a Theory of Instruction (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966) 19.

[5]Vygotsky, Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes, eds. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Silvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966) 86.

[6]Calvin A. Colarusso and Robert A. Nemiroff, Adult Development: A New Dimension in Psychodynamic Theory and Practice (New York: Plenum, 1981) 223.

[7]Gene H. Krupa, "Perry's Model of Development and The Teaching of Freshman Writing," FEN 11 (1982): 17.

[8]William Perry, Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1968) 213.

[9]Louise Wetherbee Phelps, "Rhythm and Pattern in a Composing Life," in Writer's Own Writing, ed. Tom Waldrep (New York: Random House, 1985). In Press.

[10]Charles Schuster, "Teaching 'Teaching Composition'," Teaching Writing 6 (1982): 36.

[11]Robert P. Parker, "Writing Courses for Teachers: From Practice to Theory," CCC 33 (1982): 413.

[12]Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees, Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community (Washington, D. C.: Association of American Colleges, 1985).